

Please give me your slightly bitter side

"Nice to meet you" will someday become "goodbye."

Lego

The elevator ride was familiar. I'd made this journey dozens of times over the years—more times than I could count. The doors opened onto the quiet hallway. Expensive carpet. Muted lighting. The same stillness I remembered from every other visit.

The hallway outside his penthouse was cool and quiet, the carpet muffling my footsteps. It smelled faintly of lemon polish and expensive air conditioning. I stopped in front of his door. The wood grain was familiar, a pattern I'd memorized over years of standing right here.

I pulled out my phone.

Me: I'm outside! Just wanted to say hi for a sec.

The message sent. The status changed to delivered.

Read. Almost instantly.

I waited. Ten seconds. Thirty. A minute.

The door stayed closed.

I frowned, a small knot of worry tightening in my stomach. Maybe he didn't hear the notification? But he'd read it. I raised my hand and knocked. Three sharp raps.

I knocked.

Three gentle raps, the same pattern I always used. Soft enough not to startle, loud enough to be heard.

Silence.

I knocked again, a little louder this time.

"P'Will?" My voice sounded small in the empty hallway. "It's me. Lego. I just wanted to check in."

Nothing. No footsteps. No voice calling out. No sound of movement at all. I stared at the door.

He's ignoring me.

The realization settled into my chest like a stone.

I stood there, my hand still raised, feeling foolish.

The knot in my stomach twisted tighter.

This wasn't new. This was... old. This was the William from before. The William from the bad days. My hand dropped to my bag. Buried deep at the bottom, under receipts and lip balm and loose change, was a key.

He'd given it to me two years ago, on a day when he was feeling brave. "For emergencies," he'd said, pressing the cold metal into my palm. "In case I... can't open it myself."

I had never used it. Not once.

Using it felt like an invasion. Like admitting that the door was locked not because he was busy, but because he was broken.

Even during the worst times—the months of silence, the ignored calls, the doors that stayed closed no matter how long I waited—I'd never used it. It felt like a violation. Like crossing a line that couldn't be uncrossed.

I didn't reach for it now. Instead, I slid down the wall until I was sitting on the floor, my legs crossed, my long white skirt pooling around me on the carpet.

The first times had been the hardest.

The memory washed over me, unbidden.

Three years ago. The first winter after his mother died.

I'd come here every day after school, carrying flowers I'd stolen from the reject pile at the shop. Wilting lilies. Roses with bent stems. Anything that still had a little color left.

Still raw from losing Auntie, still desperate to hold onto the only connection I had left to her. William was all I had. The son she'd loved so fiercely, the artist she'd believed in so completely. If I could just keep him close, I'd thought, maybe some part of her would stay too.

But William didn't want to be kept close. William wanted to disappear.

Things improve with flowers, his mother used to say. A gift can change someone's day.

I'd believed her. I'd believed that if I just showed up enough, if I brought enough beauty to his doorstep, I could fix him.

So I'd knocked. And waited. And knocked again.

Sometimes I sat there for hours, doing my homework on the floor of the hallway, the security guard eyeing me with pity but never asking me to leave. Sometimes the sun went down and the hallway lights flickered on, buzzing softly overhead. Sometimes I just left my flowers by the door and walked home in the dark, my heart heavy.

But I kept coming back. Because he was William. Because he was family. Because I didn't know how to give up on people. So I sat down in the hallway, my back against the wall, the sunflowers cradled in my arms, and I waited some more.

"Things improve with flowers." Auntie used to say. She believed it with her whole heart. Believed that a gift could change someone's day, that beauty could crack open even the most tightly closed doors. She'd built her whole life around that belief—the shop, the arrangements, the careful attention she gave to every bloom.

I'd inherited that belief along with everything else.

So I kept coming back. Kept bringing flowers. Kept sitting in that hallway, hour after hour, waiting for the door to open.

Some days it got dark before I gave up. I'd watch the light fade through the window at the end of the hall, the shadows lengthening across the carpet, and eventually I'd stand up on stiff legs and go home.

Alone.

Without seeing him.

Without knowing if he was even still alive on the other side of that door.

And then, one Wednesday, everything changed.

I'd been sitting there for almost three hours. The flowers that day were white lilies—Auntie's favorite for difficult occasions. My legs had gone numb. My phone battery was dying. I was starting to wonder if I should call someone, escalate somehow, break down the door myself.

Then I heard it.

A click. The deadbolt sliding back.

The door opened.

William stood there, his face swollen, his eyes red, tears still streaming down his cheeks. He looked like he hadn't slept in days. He looked like he was falling apart.

He looked at me—really looked, for the first time in months—and something in his expression crumbled.

He'd looked wrecked. Eyes swollen, hair a mess, wearing clothes he hadn't changed in days. He was crying before he even saw me. But he'd opened the door. He'd pulled me into a hug so tight it bruised, sobbing into my shoulder like I was the only solid thing in his world. He'd taken the flowers—bruised carnations that day—and held them like they were precious. Held the lilies awkwardly between us. Held on as tight as I could.

He invited me in that day.

The apartment was a disaster—takeout containers piled on every surface, canvases scattered across the floor, the curtains drawn so tightly that no light could get through. It smelled like paint and unwashed clothes and something sour I didn't want to identify. But William was talking. That was what mattered.

"I'm sorry," he kept saying, his voice hoarse from crying. "I'm sorry. I should have answered. I should have—"

"It's okay," I told him. "You're here now. That's what matters."

He sat on the couch, still clutching the lilies, and told me things he'd never told me before. About the darkness that crept in at the edges. About the days when getting out of bed felt impossible. About the medication he'd stopped taking because it made him feel numb.

"I'll do better," he promised. "I'll take my medication. I'll talk to my therapist. I'll—"

"Just take it one day at a time," I said, echoing something Auntie used to tell him. "One thing at a time."

He nodded, tears still leaking from the corners of his eyes.

"I'm sorry," he'd choked out.

We'd sat on his floor for hours. I'd made him tea. I'd watched him swallow the pills. I'd listened to him talk about the darkness that lived in his head.

He hadn't left the apartment after that. Not really. But he'd let me in.

And that had been enough.

He kept those promises.

Mostly.

He took his medication again. He scheduled regular sessions with his therapist. He let me visit more often, even if the visits were sometimes short and strained.

But he didn't leave the apartment.

Not once. Not for months that stretched into years. Not even when I begged him, when I told him about the flower shop and how much it needed him, when I reminded him of all the things Auntie would have wanted him to see and do.

He just couldn't.

And eventually, I stopped asking.

Now I stood in the same hallway, the key still in my hand, the door still closed.

Different day. Different circumstances. The same familiar ache.

He's ignoring me again.

But this time felt different. This time, something had happened—the session with Est, whatever that meant. This time, the silence felt less like withdrawal and more like... aftermath.

I put the key back in my bag. I didn't use it. Couldn't use it. Not like this, not without permission, not when I didn't know what I'd find on the other side. Right there in the hallway, my back against the wall across from his door, my white skirt pooling around me on the expensive carpet. The same position I'd taken so many times before.

The hallway was quiet. The light was starting to fade, the sun sinking lower, the shadows stretching longer and behind that door, William was doing whatever William did when he didn't want to be found.

I closed my eyes and waited.

But I didn't leave.

I couldn't. Not yet. Not when William might open the door at any moment. Not when he might need me.

So I stayed.

Sitting in that hallway, my white skirt spread around me like petals, my phone clutched in my hands, waiting for a door that might never open.

Please open. I thought. Please be okay.

The elevator dinged.

I looked up from my phone, startled out of the half-daze I'd fallen into. The hallway had grown dimmer in the time I'd been sitting there, the light shifting from amber to grey, and I hadn't even noticed.

The elevator doors slid open.

William's manager stepped out first.—She was immaculate as always, dressed in a tailored blazer and heels that clicked sharply against the floor. Her expression was composed, professional, revealing nothing, clicking purpose that always made me feel like a child playing dress-up. Her suit was sharp enough to cut glass, She was terrifyingly competent. Exactly what William needed: a human firewall.

Behind her were two men in nondescript grey uniforms, carrying empty equipment cases.

But her eyes found me immediately.

Her expression didn't change—no surprise, no warmth, just a cool recognition. "Good afternoon, Lego."

I scrambled to my feet, smoothing down my skirt. "Good afternoon, P'."

She glanced at the closed door, then back at me. "He is not opening the door?" The question wasn't unkind, but hearing it spoken aloud made the loneliness solidify into a rock in my throat. The question cut through my fumbled explanation. She said it matter-of-factly, like she was confirming a weather report. Like this was something that happened regularly enough to be unremarkable.

Somehow, that made it worse.

I nodded, not trusting my voice. A lump had formed in my throat, thick and uncomfortable.

Behind her, two men stood waiting. Workers of some kind—movers, maybe—dressed in matching uniforms, carrying empty bags and equipment cases. They didn't look at me. Their faces were professionally blank.

She pulled out her phone and made a call. "I'm outside with the workers who will take the things." Her voice was crisp, businesslike. I stood there, frozen, trying to piece together what was happening.

Take the things. What things?

And then, before I could ask, before I could do anything at all—

The door opened.

I heard footsteps first.

Quick, retreating footsteps, moving away from the door almost before it finished swinging inward. And then a slam—not the front door, but another one deeper inside the apartment. A bedroom door, maybe.

William's room.

He'd opened the door and fled. Let us in without facing us. Without looking at me.

The manager sighed—a small, controlled sound that somehow conveyed more frustration than any words could have—and gestured for us to enter. "Come in."

The apartment was almost normal.

That was the first thing I noticed. The lights were on. The curtains were partially open, letting in the last grey light of evening. The furniture was in its usual places. The paintings on the walls hung straight.

But the session equipment was still there. A tripod stood near the window, its legs extended, a camera mount empty at the top. Light stands clustered in one corner, their panels dark. Cables snaked across the floor, and bags of photography equipment sat open and half-unpacked near the couch.

Est's things.

My stomach tightened. Was Est still here?

I looked around the apartment, half-expecting to see him emerge from a corner, from the kitchen, from somewhere. But there was no one. Just the equipment, abandoned like the aftermath of something interrupted. Something that had gone wrong.

The two workers moved with practiced efficiency.

They spread out through the living room, collecting equipment, coiling cables, packing everything into the bags they'd brought. Their movements were quick but careful—the kind of handling that spoke of experience, of understanding that this equipment was expensive and fragile. I stood near the entrance, not sure what to do with myself.

The manager walked the perimeter, checking items off on her phone, her heels clicking against the hardwood. When she noticed something on the floor near the easel, she stopped.

"Broken," she said, more to herself than anyone else. "Pack what can be salvaged. Document the rest."

I looked. A light stand, its metal shaft bent at an odd angle. And beside it, a reflector panel with a crack running through its surface.

The workers photographed the damage, made notes, packed the broken items separately. She sighed again—that same controlled exhale of professional

frustration.

I wondered what had happened here.

William's bedroom door stayed closed.

I kept glancing at it, waiting for it to open, waiting for him to emerge and explain. To tell me what had gone wrong with the session. To tell me why Est's equipment was being carted away by strangers. To tell me anything.

But the door remained shut. Silent. Just like earlier.

I started noticing the small things.

A scattering of paintbrushes on the floor near the window, like they'd been swept off a table. Some were bent, their bristles splayed at wrong angles. Others had rolled under furniture, half-hidden in shadow.

A broken cup near the kitchen counter, ceramic shards scattered in a small radius. Coffee, maybe, or tea—the liquid had dried into a dark stain on the hardwood.

A paint stain on the floor near the easel, vivid blue against the pale wood. And beside it, a jar of dirty water, the kind used to clean brushes between colors. It had been knocked over at some point, the grey-brown water spreading in a puddle that was still faintly damp. The scene painted itself in my mind. An argument. A confrontation. Things thrown or knocked over in the heat of the moment.

The workers finished quickly, all of Est's equipment was packed and ready to go. The tripod, the light stands, the cameras and lenses and cables—all of it loaded onto a small cart one of the workers had brought.

The manager did a final sweep of the apartment, checking corners, making notes. She paused by me, her expression softening just a fraction. "He won't come out." she said quietly. It wasn't a question. "We're rescheduling the session. Est's equipment will be returned to him tomorrow." She patted my shoulder—two quick, awkward taps—before turning away. "Goodbye, Lego."

The door clicked shut behind them and then I was alone in the living room. Just me. The fading light. The stain on the floor. And the silence radiating from behind William's bedroom door. The silence was enormous.

It pressed against my ears, thick and heavy, broken only by the faint hum of the building's ventilation and the distant sounds of the city far below. The light had faded almost completely now, the apartment lit only by the soft glow of a few lamps someone had left on. I stood in the middle of the living room, surrounded by the debris of whatever had happened here.

The broken cup. The scattered paintbrushes. The paint stain and the dirty water.



And behind that closed bedroom door, William.

Hiding.

Just like he'd hidden from me in the hallway. Just like he'd hidden for years, locking himself away from the world, from the people who loved him, from anything that might require him to feel something he wasn't ready to feel.

I should leave.

That was the smart thing to do. The healthy thing. I'd come to check on him, and he clearly didn't want to be checked on. He'd opened the door for his manager, for the workers, but he hadn't come out to see me. Hadn't even looked at me. That was an answer. That was a message.

Go home, Lego. He doesn't want you here.

But my feet didn't move.

The apartment was quiet.

Too quiet. The kind of silence that pressed against your skin, that made you hyperaware of every small sound—the hum of the refrigerator, the distant traffic far below, the soft pad of my own footsteps as I moved through the space.

William was still in his room. The door remained closed, a barrier I didn't dare approach.

So I did what I knew how to do. I cleaned.

The paintbrushes first. I gathered them from the floor, cradling them in my palms like wounded things. Some were beyond saving—bristles bent and crushed, handles cracked—but others might still be okay if I washed them soon. I carried them to the kitchen sink, ran warm water, worked the dried paint from each one with careful fingers.

This is something, I told myself. This is helping.

Then the glass.

I found a dustpan and broom in the kitchen closet—The muscle memory was still there. I knew this apartment like I knew my own. Every drawer, every corner, every hidden place. The ceramic shards scattered across the floor with a soft, tinkling sound as I swept them into a pile. I was careful, methodical. The last thing William needed was to step on broken glass in his bare feet. I was almost finished when I heard the bedroom door open.

I looked up.

William stood in the doorway of his room, framed by the dim light behind him. My breath caught.

He looked wrong.

His face was red, blotchy in the way faces get after hours of crying. His makeup—I hadn't even realized he'd been wearing any—was smeared across his cheeks, dark streaks of what might have been eyeliner tracing tear tracks down his skin. His eyes were swollen, still wet, still leaking at the corners.

He looked like he'd been shattered and hastily reassembled. Like he was holding himself together through sheer force of will.

But it was his expression that froze me. It wasn't the sad, hollow look I was used to. It wasn't the distant, dissociative gaze of his depression.

It was sharp. Jagged. Hostile.

He looked at me, crouching on the floor with my dustpan. Then he looked at the pile of glass.

Something in his expression shifted. Hardened. "Why are you here?"

The question hung in the air, ridiculous and cruel. Why was I here? Because I had a key I didn't use. Because I waited in hallways. Because I made pancakes and sent him photos and wished him luck. Because I was the person who stayed when everyone else left.

I opened my mouth to answer, but nothing came out. What was I supposed to say? Because I was worried. Because you didn't answer my messages. Because I've been waiting outside for hours. Because I love you and I don't know how to stop.

All of it felt inadequate. All of it felt like too much.

Was I his friend? The thought surfaced unbidden. His family?

I'd always assumed I was. I'd assumed the years of visits, the flowers, the waiting in hallways meant something. That the key he'd given me, the hugs, the tears we'd shared over Auntie's memory had built something real between us.

But standing here now, with him looking at me like I was a stranger, like I was an intrusion—

I didn't know anymore.

"Just go, Lego."

He said it without looking at me. His voice was flat, empty, scraped raw from crying.

"What?" The word came out before I could stop it.

"Go." He still wouldn't meet my eyes. "Please."

I didn't move.

Maybe I should have. Maybe leaving was the right thing to do—the healthy thing, the thing that respected his boundaries, the thing that acknowledged he was an adult who could make his own choices about who he wanted in his space.

But I couldn't.

"What happened?" My voice came out weak, barely above a whisper. It didn't seem to reach him. He stood there, swaying slightly, like a tree in a storm.

I tried again.

"Did something happen with Est?"

The name was a match struck in a room full of gasoline.

William's whole body changed. His shoulders went rigid. His jaw clenched. Something dark and terrible flickered across his face—pain, maybe, or anger, or some toxic combination of both.

He moved.

Before I could react, he was in front of me, his hand closing around the broom handle. He didn't pull gently. He yanked, wrenching it from my grip with a violence that made me stumble backward.

"I'm not feeling well enough to have to put up with you now, Lego."

His voice was different. Harder. Cold in a way I'd never heard from him before.

"Get out."

It felt like a nightmare. The William standing before me—this shaking, shouting stranger with smeared makeup and fury in his eyes—wasn't someone I knew. This wasn't the boy who cried on my shoulder. This wasn't the man who bought me an oversized sweater because he wanted me to be warm.

I stared at him.

This wasn't William. Not the William I knew, not the quiet artist who cried into my shoulder, not the boy Auntie had loved so fiercely, not the man who'd hugged me in this very doorway and promised to do better.

This was someone else. Something else.

Something broken and sharp and dangerous.

"P'Will—" I started.

He grabbed my wrist.

His fingers closed around the bone with bruising force, and then he was pulling me, dragging me across the apartment toward the door. I stumbled, my sandals catching on the floor, my feet passing over the remaining shards of glass I hadn't finished sweeping.

"Wait—" I tried to twist free, but his grip was iron. "You're hurting me—"

He didn't seem to hear. Didn't seem to care. He just kept moving, kept pulling, his body trembling with something that looked like rage but felt like despair.

The doorframe caught my left side.

I gasped as my shoulder and hip connected with the wood, pain blooming bright and sudden. William didn't stop. He pushed me through the gap, out into the hallway, his hand finally releasing my wrist.

I stumbled, caught myself against the opposite wall, and turned around.

William stood in the doorway, framed by the light of his apartment. His face was wet with fresh tears. His body shook so hard I could see it from here—tiny tremors running through him like fault lines before an earthquake.

His hand was still raised, the one that had gripped my wrist. I could see the imprint of his fingers on my skin, red and angry.

We stared at each other.

Him inside. Me outside. The threshold between us like a chasm.

"Who are you?" The question fell out of me before I knew I was going to ask it.

It wasn't accusation. It wasn't anger. It was genuine confusion, genuine grief, because the person standing in front of me was not someone I recognized. Not someone I knew how to love.

William's face crumpled. For one fraction of a second, I saw him—the real him, the scared and hurting person underneath the rage. His eyes went wide, his lips parted, and he looked at me like he was seeing me for the first time. Like he was seeing what he'd done.

Then the door slammed shut.

The sound echoed down the hallway.

I stood there, frozen, my back pressed against the wall, my wrist throbbing, my shoulder aching where it had hit the doorframe. The silence rushed back in, thick and suffocating.

I stared at the closed door.

He hurt me.

The thought was distant, clinical, like it was happening to someone else. He grabbed me and dragged me and threw me out and he hurt me.

William had never hurt me before. Never grabbed me, never looked at me like I was something to be discarded. Even in his worst moments—the years of isolation, the ignored messages, the doors that stayed closed—he'd never been cruel.

But this.

This was something else.

My heart hammered a frantic rhythm against my ribs. I was alone in the hallway once more, but this time, I didn't sit down. This time, I didn't wait. Because the person behind that door wasn't William.

The taxi ride was a blur.

I didn't remember hailing it. Didn't remember giving the driver an address. One moment I was sitting on the floor of William's hallway, tears streaming down my face, and the next I was in the back of a car, the city lights smearing past the window like watercolors left out in the rain.

My body moved on autopilot. Some survival instinct taking over, carrying me away from the wreckage, pointing me toward the only safe place I could think of.

Ink & Ashes.

I stared at my hands in my lap. They were trembling. My left side throbbed with every breath—shoulder, hip, ribs, a constellation of pain where I'd connected with the doorframe. My wrist was swelling, the red marks darkening toward purple. My feet stung where the glass had cut through my sandals, thin lines of dried blood visible against my skin.

This isn't my life, I thought distantly. This isn't happening to me.

It felt like watching a movie of someone else. Someone who looked like me, who wore my clothes, who had my face—but couldn't possibly be me. Because things like this didn't happen to me. William didn't hurt me. William was my family. William was—

Who are you?

The question bounced around my skull. Not just for William. For me, too.

I'd asked him that. And he'd slammed the door in my face.

The taxi slowed.

I looked up. The familiar storefront of Ink & Ashes materialized through the window, its neon sign dark, the interior lights off. Closed for the night.

The driver turned around. He was older, with kind eyes and grey at his temples.

"Are you okay, kid?" he asked.

"Fine." I whispered. "Just tired." I got out before he could ask anything else.

The night air hit me like a wall. Cool. Damp. The pavement was cold under my feet, and I realized I could feel it too clearly—the glass cuts stinging with every step.

The taxi pulled away.

I stood on the sidewalk, swaying slightly, staring at the darkened storefront.

He's not here, I thought. The studio is closed. He's not—

My hand moved toward my pocket, my fingers clumsy and shaking, reaching for my phone to call him—

"I was just about to call you!"

The voice was sing-song, bright, cutting through the fog in my brain.

I looked up.

Hong was stepping out of the side door, keys jingling in his hand as he locked up. He was wearing his usual black t-shirt and jeans, silver hair catching the streetlamp light. He looked solid. Real.

He turned, a grin already on his face. "Hey! Perfect timing. I was thinking we could go to that noodle place you like, or maybe—"

He stopped. The smile fell.

His smile didn't fade slowly; it dropped off his face like a stone. He took a step toward me, his eyes narrowing, scanning me from head to toe.

"What happened?"

The question was sharp, immediate.

He was moving toward me now, closing the distance between us with quick steps.

"Are you okay? You're pale, shorty."

The nickname—the one he'd started using a few weeks ago, the one that always made me roll my eyes and pretend to be annoyed—landed differently tonight. He was trying to joke. Trying to lighten the mood, to break through whatever he was seeing on my face.

But I could see the worry underneath. Could see the way his eyes were scanning me, taking in the details—the tear-stained cheeks, the way I was holding my wrist, the slight hunch of my shoulders.

"I'm fine." I said.

The words came out automatically. Reflexively. The same thing I'd told the taxi driver. The same thing I'd been telling myself since I left William's building.

I'm fine. Nothing happened. Everything is okay.

Hong stopped in front of me. He was close now—close enough that I could see the furrow between his brows, the tightness around his mouth.

"Lego."

Just my name. Soft. Patient.

I looked at him.

His eyes were steady on mine, and I could see it there—the unspoken question. The space he was offering me to tell the truth.

Tell me what really happened.

I opened my mouth.

And nothing came out.

What was I supposed to say?

William grabbed me. William hurt me. William looked at me like I was nothing and threw me out of his apartment like garbage.

The words were there, somewhere, but they wouldn't form. Couldn't form. Because saying them out loud would make them real, and if they were real, then—

Then the William I knew didn't exist.

Then everything I'd believed about us—the years of friendship, the shared grief over Auntie, the careful hope I'd been nurturing that he was getting better—was a lie.

Then I was alone.

He just stood there, looking at me. His expression was unreadable, but his eyes—his eyes saw too much. They always did.

Please don't push, I begged silently. Please just accept it. Please let me pretend.

"Okay." Hong said finally.

The word should have been a relief. He was letting it go. He was accepting my excuse. He was—

"Then you won't mind if I take a look at your wrist." I froze. Hong's expression went very still.

Hong didn't touch me. Didn't reach out. Just looked, his eyes tracking the damage, his jaw tightening with each passing second.

When he finally spoke, his voice was soft. Controlled. The kind of controlled that meant he was working very hard not to explode.

"Who did this?"

I said nothing.

"Lego. Who did this to you?"

My vision blurred. Tears, again, spilling over without permission. "I don't know." I whispered.

Hong's brow furrowed. "What do you mean you don't—"

"I mean I don't know him." The words came out in a rush, broken and wet. "The person I saw tonight—that wasn't William. That wasn't my friend. That was someone else. Something else. And I don't—I don't know who that was. I don't know what happened. I don't know what I did wrong. I don't—" My voice cracked. Shattered.

It was a sound I didn't recognize. A low, jagged wail that tore itself from the bottom of my lungs. It sounded like an animal caught in a trap. It sounded like something dying. I slapped a hand over my mouth, horrified, but the sob broke through anyway, violent and ugly. My knees buckled.

"Whoa, hey—"

Hong moved faster than I'd ever seen him move. He was there before I hit the pavement, his arms catching me, holding me up. He didn't ask questions this time. He just held on. I buried my face in his shoulder

"I've got you," Hong murmured, his hand stroking the back of my head, careful not



to touch my braids. "I've got you, just breathe." But I couldn't breathe. The sobs were coming too fast, hiccuping and painful, making my ribs ache.

"I'll call my sister, okay?" he said, his voice barely audible over the noise I was making. He pulled back just enough to look at me, his thumbs wiping away tears that were immediately replaced by new ones. "She'll come for us in the car, okay? Everything's going to be alright."

Everything's going to be alright.

It was the lie people told children.

Hong pulled his phone out with one hand, keeping the other firmly on my shoulder as if anchoring me to the earth. I heard him make the call. It was short. Urgent.

His voice was low, urgent, speaking in quick sentences I couldn't quite parse through the fog in my head. Something about needing a ride. Something about now.

Then he was back in front of me, rummaging through his backpack. He pulled out a packet of tissues and pressed them into my hands—almost desperately, like he needed to do something and this was all he had.

"Let's sit and wait, okay?"

He guided me to one of the benches outside the studio. The ones where companions waited for those getting tattoos. Where parents sat while their teenagers got piercings. Where normal people waited for normal things on normal days. I sank onto the bench. My legs gave out gratefully beneath me.

We sat there for a few minutes.

Hong didn't push. Didn't ask questions. Just sat beside me, close enough that I could feel his warmth, far enough that I didn't feel crowded.

I stared at my hands in my lap.

My white skirt was wrinkled now, smudged with something—dirt, maybe, from the hallway floor. My oversized sweater hung off one shoulder, exposing the pink tank top beneath. My braids were coming loose, strands of hair escaping to stick to my tear-damp cheeks. I'd felt so pretty this morning. Putting on this outfit. Choosing these clothes. Getting ready for a day that was supposed to be good. Now the clothes felt ridiculous. Like a costume from someone else's life. Time passed before I realized it.

A car pulled up.

It was shiny. Very clean. The kind of clean that spoke of someone who took pride in their vehicle, who didn't let messes accumulate, who had their life together in ways

I clearly didn't.

It's a shame we had to meet like this, I thought distantly.

Hong stood, waving at the driver. I caught a glimpse of a woman behind the wheel—his sister, presumably—before Hong was helping me up, guiding me toward the back door.

The interior was just as clean as the exterior. Leather seats. That new-car smell mixed with something floral.

And sitting in the backseat, strapped into a car seat, was a little boy. He couldn't have been more than four. Round cheeks. Bright eyes. A smile so pure and oblivious that something in my chest cracked all over again.

"Uncle Hong!" the boy chirped, practically bouncing in his seat. Hong climbed in beside me, shutting the door. He waved at the child—casual, affectionate—and pressed more tissues into my hands.

I clutched them like a lifeline.

Hong's house was... unexpected. Tidy. Organized. The kind of space that looked like it belonged in a magazine, despite the evidence of a young child living there. Toys were scattered across the living room floor—building blocks and stuffed animals and a plastic dinosaur lying on its side—but even the chaos felt contained. Intentional.

This is my first time at Hong's house, I realized.

But the distinction felt meaningless. This was Hong's family. Hong's space. Hong's life, opening up to include me in a way I hadn't expected.

Before I knew it, I was sitting in a chair.

Hong's sister—I still didn't know her name, I realized with a flush of shame—was kneeling in front of me, examining my feet. The small cuts from the glass. The angry red lines I'd barely noticed until now.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. My voice was hoarse from crying. Barely audible.

She looked up at me with kind eyes. Hong's eyes, I realized. The same shape, the same warmth.

"Don't worry," she said softly. "They'll heal soon."

She cleaned the cuts with gentle hands, applied antiseptic that stung briefly, covered the worst of them with small bandages. Professional. Efficient. Like she'd done this a hundred times before.

Maybe she had, I thought. Children fall. Children get hurt. This is just what mothers

do.

When she finished, Hong was there.

He wrapped his arms around me—carefully, mindful of my injuries—and held on tight.

And I cried.

Again.

Into his shoulder, soaking his shirt, letting out all the grief and confusion and fear that had been building since William's door slammed in my face. Hong didn't shush me. Didn't tell me it was okay. Just held on and let me break.

Eventually, the tears slowed.

Hong pulled back, his hands on my shoulders, and looked at my face. Really looked, the way he always did. Seeing everything I tried to hide. Then he smiled.

It was a gentle smile. A we're going to get through this smile.

"Let's eat here, okay?" he said. "That way we won't have to go out for a while."

I nodded.

I didn't have the energy to argue.

The evening passed in soft, blurred fragments.

Hong's sister—made a simple dinner. Rice and vegetables and some kind of soup that tasted like comfort. The little boy—chattered throughout the meal, oblivious to the heaviness hanging over the adults. He showed me his dinosaur collection. Told me about his favorite cartoon. Asked if I liked flowers because "You smell like flowers." I managed to smile at him. A real smile, small but genuine. Children had that effect. They didn't know how broken you were. They just saw a person who might be interested in dinosaurs.

"You don't have to talk about it." Hong said finally. "Not tonight. Not ever, if you don't want to."

I stared at my hands. At the bruises on my wrist, now covered by a bandage. "I don't know how to talk about it." I admitted. "I don't... I don't understand what happened."

"That's okay."

"It's not okay." The words came out sharper than I intended. "None of this is okay. William isn't okay. I'm not okay. And I don't know how to fix any of it."

Hong was quiet for a moment.

"Maybe you can't." he said gently. "Maybe some things aren't yours to fix."

"You should stay the night." she said firmly. Not quite an order, but close. "It's late. You're exhausted. The guest room is already made up."

Part of me wanted to accept. Wanted to curl up in a strange bed in a safe house and let someone else take care of everything.

But a larger part of me needed to go home.

Needed my own space. My own pillows. My own stuffed animals and cushions and the particular comfort of a place that was mine.

"Thank you." I said. "Really. But I think I need to sleep in my own bed tonight."

Hong sister looked like she wanted to argue, but Hong shook his head slightly. Some silent sibling communication I couldn't quite read.

"I'll call a taxi." Hong said.

We stood outside while the car was on its way. The night had grown cooler, and I wrapped my arms around myself—carefully, avoiding the sore spots.

"I'll come see you tomorrow, okay?" Hong said.

Okay. He'd said that word a thousand times today, I thought.

"That way I'll get to see your apartment." He was trying to sound casual, but I could hear the concern underneath. The checking-in. The I need to make sure you're actually alright.

"Text me when you get home, okay?"

I nodded. "I will."

He hugged me one last time. Tight and warm and careful. The kind of hug that said I'm here and you're not alone and we'll figure this out together.

Then the taxi pulled up.

I got in.

The drive home was quiet.

I watched the city lights blur past the window, the same way they had earlier, but

something felt different now. Lighter, maybe. Not healed—nowhere close to healed—but... held.

Someone knew. Someone had seen me at my worst and hadn't flinched.

Someone was coming to see me tomorrow.

The taxi pulled up to my building. I paid, climbed out, and made my way up the stairs on shaky legs.

My apartment was dark when I entered. I didn't bother turning on the lights. Just kicked off my sandals—carefully, mindful of the bandages on my feet—and collapsed onto my bed.

My phone buzzed.

Hong: Home yet?

I typed back with clumsy fingers.

Me: Just got in. Going to sleep.

Hong: Good. Rest. I'll be there around noon tomorrow.

Me: Okay.

Hong: Goodnight, Lego. You're going to be okay.

I stared at the message for a long moment.

Okay.

There it was again. That word. Hollow and hopeful all at once.

I set the phone on my nightstand, pulled the covers over myself—still in my ridiculous white skirt and pink tank top—and closed my eyes. Sleep came faster than I expected.

And if I dreamed, I didn't remember.